DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 980 PS 009 372

AUTHOR Moore, Nancy V.; And Others
TITLE The Child's Development of the Concept of Family.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (New Orleans, Louisiana, March 17-20, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; *Children; *Cognitive Development; *Divorce; Elementary School Students; *Family (Sociological Unit); Interviews; Junior High School Students; Preschool Children; Research Methodology; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

Two basic concerns of this study were to discover if cognitive level affects a child's understandings about family and to explore the effects of social learning factors on a child's understandings of family. Subjects were 28 boys and girls at each of the three higher Piagetian cognitive levels who were each given a newly constructed interview focusing on their concepts of family. The children were from University-affiliated families. Half of each group was from intact families and half from divorced families. Piagetian cognitive level was shown to have the strongest influence on the concept of family, which could be described in terms of three levels of knowing: (1) rigid definitions of family roles and aspects according to direct observations; (2) emphasis on categorical status and generalized normative functions; (3) consideration of family aspects and roles in the light of purposes and intentions. The first level appeared to be composed of only domestic function, biological, and residence factors, with emotional, legal, and social factors developing with cognitive level. Girls showed some advancement of concept over boys, and more often referred to personal proximity factors. Children from divorced families mentioned emotional factors more, listed more activities for adults, and used membership as a criterion for family less than children from intact families. All children considered pictures of two "parents" and a child to show families, but only three-quarters thought that an elderly couple was a family, and just two-thirds said that a young couple was a family. About one-half of the children said that a picture showing a single parent and a child did not show a family. There was some evidence that the latter assertion was more often made by children from intact families than by those from divorced families. (Author/MS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED140980

The Child's Development of the Concept of Family

Paper Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, La., March, 1977

by Nancy V. Moore, Robert G. Cooper, Jr., and Mark H. Bickhard*
The University of Texas at Austin

Let me ask you to consider two questions related to family roles:

1. Would a mother still be a mother if she fixed the car whenever it was broken?

2. Would she still be a mother if she didn't take care of her kids?

Some possible answers are:

"No, if she fixed the car she'd be a daddy."

"She couldn't be a mother without taking care of her kids, 'cause that's what mothers do."

"It doesn't matter what she does or doesn't do; if she had a kid, she's a mother."

"Well, it really doesn't exactly matter the things she does or doesn't do, but if she doesn't take good care of her kids, they probably wouldn't have much respect for her. They maybe wouldn't feel they should treat her like a mother."

These are some of the answers given in a study which was designed to probe the child's development of the concept of family.

There were two basic concerns of the study. First, does cognitive level affect the child's understandings about family? Other researchers have reported evidence for the effects of cognitive level on the understanding of various aspects of social reality similar to the effects of cognitive level on the understanding of physical reality that Piaget has pointed out. For example, Kohlberg (1964) has researched the effects of cognitive level on moral judgment, Bernstein and Cowan (1975) have explored its effects on the child's knowledge of where babies come from, and Bigelow (1977) has reported cognitive level effects in children's friendship expectations.

In addition to exploring the possibility of effects of cognitive level on the concept of family, there was a concern to explore the possibility of effects of social learning factors, since family is explicitly an area of social experience. The two factors chosen were sex and intactness of family. The latter was chosen since being from a broken home could be considered to present the child with a

PS 009372

*A more complete report is being prepared for publication, and may be obtained upon request from the senior author, c/o of the Department of Home Economics, The University of Texas at Austin. Austin, Texas 78712.

deviant model of family life. Sex was chosen because it has often been shown to be an important dimension of social reality.

In order to explore these two concerns, 84 children aged 4 through 13, from white, university-affiliated families, were given a standardized individual interview which was constructed for this study after a review of literature in the family field. The questions, which were designed to allow the child to express his understanding of the full range of his concept of family, were the two questions posed at the beginning plus the following:

What is a family?

What is a mother? What do mothers do? (These two were repeated for fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers.)

Is a family still a family if they don't have a house or a home to live in?

Is a father still a father if he does all the housecleaning? Is he still a father if he doesn't take care of his kids?

What does it mean, "to get married"?

What is a wife? Can a woman be a wife and not a mother? Can she be a mother and not a wife? (These three were repeated for husband and father.)

How many grandmothers does a child usually have? Why?

Do the grandmothers usually have the same last name? Why do they have the last names they do?

Why do people have families?

How do people in families make each other happy in ways that friends don't?

In addition, each child was shown an array of six line drawings of potential family groupings and asked whether the pictures showed a family. The six groupings were: two parent-figures and a child; the parents, grandparents and a child; the the grandparents alone; the parents alone; the mother and child alone; the father and child alone. The administrator of the interview, who was not informed of the hypotheses of the study, was directed to continue probing the child's answers until he was satisfied that the child had fully explained the reasoning behind his or her answer.

In order to assess the children's responses in the light of the concerns of the study, the children were grouped into twelve equally balanced groups defined by Piagetian cognitive level, sex, and intactness of family. These factors compose the three right-hand columns of the table attached. The Piagetian cognitive levels were preoperations, concrete operations, and formal operations. Assignment to a level was determined by testing the children on the conservation of substance and volume tasks.

Transcripts of the interviews were scored for four categories of scores, which are shown down the left hand column of the table. The first category of scoring is concept level. The system for scoring concept level was derived from a theoretical critique of Piaget by Bickhard (1973), coordinated with the role theory of Turner (1966). Scores for family concept were taken from the reasoning given for answers to the entire interview, and the scores for women's roles and for men's roles from the subsets of questions having to do with just these aspects. The three remaining categories of scores refer to the content rather than the level of the child's

understanding. The second category on the table is the child's designation of the pictures as showing a family. TThe third category is scoring for the number of mentions throughout the interview for each of eight dimensions of family life which had been identified prior to the study. The dimensions were membership, domestic functions, biological factors, guidance of children, emotional factors, co-residence, legal factors, and social expectation factors. The final category of scores is a frequency count of the number of activities or functions the child listed for the family, for women, and for men.

The data were analyzed by Analysis of Covariance (cognitive level x sex x intactness of family, with age as covariate) in order to remove so far as possible the confounding of cognitive level with chronological age. The two exceptions to this were the decisions regarding the pictures, which were subjected to chi-square analysis, and the between-dimension comparisons of frequency of mentioning the dimensions of family, which were based on inspection of rank ordering.

The table summarizes in abbreviated form the statistically significant outcomes of the analyses. Cognitive level was shown to have a strong and consistent effect on concept level in that there were significant differences between each of the three cognitive levels for all concept level scores. In addition, there were scattered effects of cognitive level on the content of the concept of family, all of which are consistent with the interpretation that older children have more knowledge about families. Sex was shown to have an effect on both concept level and content. For total family concept and for women's roles, girls' concept level was advanced over boys'. Girls were less able than boys to make a decision as to the "familiness" of childless couples, and were more likely than boys to mention things related to the family members being together. This appears consistent with the traditional cultural expectation that home and children are more important concerns to females than males. It is interesting, however, that the concept level result of sex differences contradicts the general lack of sex differences found in studies of cognitive level effects in the development of the understanding of physical reality.

The third factor, intactness of family, appeared to affect only content areas of the concept of family, not concept level. Children from divorced families were more acceptant of the single-parent deviant family form, mentioned membership as a criterion less often, and listed more activities for women and for all adult roles than did children from intact families. Additionally, at the two higher cognitive levels children from divorced families mentioned domestic functions more often than children from intact families, though the reverse was true for preoperational children. These facts might be interpreted as evidence that the family concept of children from divorced families differs from the family concept of children from intact families primarily by being more flexible and somewhat more cognizant of adult activities, especially those of women. It should also be noted that children from divorced families mentioned emotional factors more often than did children from intact families. This data did not differentiate between positive or negative emotions.

To summarize the quantitative analyses, all three factors--cognitive level, sex, and intactness of family--were shown to affect the child's development of the concept of family, although each somewhat differently. While cognitive level, and to some degree sex, determined the level of the child's concept, sex and intactness of family had more effect on the content of the concept. It should be noted that although the social learning factors did have effects on the concept of family, the effects were not noteably consistent with modeling or identification theory. Although girls showed an advanced concept level over boys for women's roles, for men's roles there was no evidence of superiority for boys or for children from intact families, nor was there a sex-by-intactness interaction. Any of these might have been predicted with modeling or identification theory, since half of the sample was from father-absent homes. Both the sex and intactness of family effects are consistent with related research by Bernstein and Cowan (1975),

McInnis (1972), and Aldous (1972).

Since a strong cognitive level effect on the concept of family was found, it is possible to characterize the developmental levels through which the children appeared to be constructing their concept of family. The developmental levels are described as three levels of knowing, which were illustrated in the answers of the children given at the beginning of this paper:

The first level of knowing, that shown by preoperational children, is an understanding of family roles and functions based rigidly on direct observations--a mother wouldn't be a mother if she didn't take care of her kids, because that's what mothers do. If she fixed the car, she'd be a daddy.

The second level of knowing, held during concrete operations, emphasized the generalized normative functions and categorical status of family members--a mother's still a mother no matter what she does or doesn't do, because she had a kid.

The third level of knowing, attained with formal operations, regards family functions and roles in the light of purposes and intentions--it doesn't matter much specifically who takes care of what particular tasks, but a mother who doesn't participate in being responsible to the needs of her children probably wouldn't really be a mother in the eyes of her kids.

This outline of the levels of knowing of the concept of family has important applications in family life education curricula at the ages of the children studied, and in divorce counseling with children. With respect to the latter, the outline of the levels of knowing in the child's concept of family provides counselors with a basis for gearing the cognitive-restructuring component of therapy at an appropriate level, and suggests that children whose parents divorce may need to work through their resolution of the family break-up again as they attain successive cognitive levels.

Lastly, the results of the study provide reassurance for divorcing parents that their children are not likely to develop highly abnormal concepts of family, although it also raises some perhaps difficult questions regarding the child's perception of the "parentness" of the non-custodial parent.

References

Aldous, J. Children's perceptions of adult role assignment. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 1972, 34, 55-65.

Bernstein, A. & Cowan, P. Development of children's concepts of where babies come from. Child Development, 1975, 46, 77-91.

Bickhard, M. H. A model of developmental and psychological processes. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Chicago, 1973.

Bigelow, G. J. Children's friendship expectations: A cognitive-developmental study. Child Development, 1977, 48, 246-253.

Kohlberg, L. Development of moral character and moral ideology. In L. L. Hoffman and L. W. Hoffman (Eds.), Review of child development research. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964, pp. 383-432.

McInnis, J. H. Family perceptions as expressed by youth ages 11-18. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Florida State University, 1972.

Turner, R. Role-taking, role standpoint, and reference-group behavior. In Bruce J. Biddle and Edwin J. Thomas (Eds.), Role theory: Concepts and research. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966, pp. 151-158.

STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN FAMILY CONCEPT

DEPENDENT VARIABLES	INDEPENDENT VARIABLES: COGNITIVE LEVEL (Pre-op = P; Con-op = C; Form-op = F)	SEX (Boys = B; Girls = G)	INTACTNESS OF FAMILY (Intact = I; Divorced = D)
CONCEPT LEVEL			
FAMILY	F > C > P	G > B	
WOMEN'S ROLES	F > C > P	G > B	
MEN'S ROLES	F > C > P		
DESIGNATION OF PICTURES AS FAMILIES			
TWO PARENTS AND CHILD (WITH OR WITHOUT GRANDPARENTS) YES: 100%			
ELDERLY COUPLE YES: 77%		GIRLS MORE OFTEN UNDECIDED	
YOUNG COUPLE YES: 67%		GIRLS MORE OFTEN UNDECIDED	
SINGLE PARENT AND CHILD YES: 53%	CON-OP LEAST LIKELY TO SAY YES		D > I
DIMENSIONS OF FAMILY (WITHIN-DIMENSION COMPARISONS)			
MEMBERSHIP			I > D
EMOTIONS			D > I
RESIDENCE		G > B	
DOMESTIC FUNCTION			PRE-OP: I > D CON-OP: D > I FORM-OP: D > I
(BETWEEN-DIMENSION COMPARISONS)			
RESIDENCE	DECREASES		
LEGAL	INCREASES		
NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES ATTRIBUTED TO			
FAMILY	F=C > P		
ALL ADULTS			D > I
WOMEN			D > I